

Preview

Who Is Sir Basil Zaharoff?

By RALPH THOMPSON

IT is not impossible that at some future time the world will know the truth about Sir Basil Zaharoff. Today, however, he appears merely as a shadowy figure, both heroic and diabolic, aged, phenomenally rich, silent upon his rôle in international politics and finance. One of the many stories printed about him states that he has written fifty-eight volumes of autobiography, which are to be destroyed at his death, unpublished. Another insists that the memoirs have already been disposed of, and that they were so extensive that it took forty-eight hours to consume them in the furnace of his Paris mansion on the Avenue Hoche. The heroic proportions—fifty-eight volumes, two days of burning—give some idea of the richness of the legend which has grown up about Zaharoff.

As in most legends, underneath the fancy lies some modicum of fact, and it is interesting to seek a way through the accounts of a generation of sensation-mongers, professional alarmists and ordinary hack-writers to what appears incontrovertible in the life of this so-called mystery man of Europe. The circumstance that Zaharoff himself has repeatedly refused to tell his own story to the public makes success difficult.* Despite this, it is not merely common curiosity that prompts investigation; Zaharoff was undoubtedly a figure of international importance during his active years, and even in his old age he exerts an influence probably potent and far-reaching.

*Advance proofs of this article were sent to Sir Basil Zaharoff and were returned with a letter dated Paris, May 7, 1932, which stated that "my rule is never to say anything concerning myself."

Typical of the vagueness enveloping Zaharoff's life is the fact that the two books which give the fullest accounts available do not even start from the same place. R. Mennevée, in *Sir Basil Zaharoff, L'Homme Mystérieux de L'Europe* (Paris, 1928), on the certification of the Patriarch of Constantinople, makes the date of Zaharoff's birth Oct. 6, 1849, and the place Mouchliou, a suburb of Constantinople. Richard Lewinsohn, German journalist, whose book has been translated into English as *The Mystery Man of Europe* (Philadelphia, 1929), agrees with Mennevée on the date, but marks the birthplace as Mughla, a village in Southwestern Anatolia, some hundreds of miles from Constantinople—this on the authority of a parish register. Other accounts vary in both place and date.

The same confusion attends the question of parentage. "Zaharoff" is a Russian name, but apparently Sir Basil's racial background is principally or entirely Greek, despite suggestions of French or Jewish lineage. Today Zaharoff may or may not be a French citizen; France has awarded him a Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, which is rarely bestowed on foreigners. But he is also a Knight Grand Cross of the British Empire, a distinction usually conferred only on British citizens. In 1922 a formal interpellation in the French Chamber of Deputies demanded the facts of Zaharoff's citizenship, but Poincaré, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, vouchsafed no answer, although replies to interpellations are, under French parliamentary rules, obligatory.

That Zaharoff's sympathies, as well as a share of his fabulous wealth,

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